

Blau P M. *Exchange and power in social life*. New York: Wiley, 1964. 352 p.  
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The theory conceptualizes social relations in terms of exchange processes. Mutual bonds emerge in social interaction as persons who incur obligations reciprocate, but the imbalance resulting from unilateral benefits engenders superior status. The implication for legitimate authority and opposition to it are analyzed. [The SSC<sup>®</sup> indicates that this book has been cited in over 1,255 publications.]

## Reciprocity and Imbalance

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*Reciprocity and Imbalance* was my original title for the book. These two terms refer to the main principles of the theory of social exchange there developed—the reciprocal obligations recurrently incurred and discharged in social interaction and the imbalance of obligations that generates status differences. But I was dissuaded from using such an abstract title.

The central idea had occurred to me years earlier during my dissertation fieldwork. While observing agents in a government office, I noticed that colleagues often discussed difficult decisions with one another, although different agents worked on different cases. Lunch periods were filled with such shop-talk. This practice of unofficial consultation immediately intrigued me. As I analyzed its implications, I conceptualized it as an exchange in which officials receive help in their work in exchange for paying respect to consultants, which is implicit in asking for advice. Recurrent transactions of this type differentiated informal status. The analysis of consultation became the central chapter of the book based on my dissertation, but it was not the main theme of that book.

Some years later as a junior faculty member at the University of Chicago, I attended a lecture by a distinguished visiting sociologist from Harvard, George C. Homans, who sketched (for the first time) his theory of social exchange. I was utterly surprised, and greatly pleased, when this well-known sociologist in the last part of his talk introduced and summarized

my chapter on consultation as "the only study I am aware of that begins to show...[how a] differentiated social structure...might arise out of a process of social exchange...." This paper was the gist of his book on social exchange.<sup>2</sup>

This experience was undoubtedly an important stimulus for redirecting my attention to social exchange, but only after a long gestation period. For several years my work did not deal with exchange, though I started to think more and more about it and later spent about two years writing nearly 150 memos on it. I was so fascinated by the subject that the first "big" word I taught my preschool daughter was "reciprocity." But to work seriously on the theory, I needed a block of uninterrupted time. A year at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford provided the opportunity to write the book.

Homans and I treated exchange differently and have moved in opposite directions since. He was interested in the psychological conditions that induce individuals to engage in exchange. My interest, in contrast, was in exchange as the elementary particle of social life, in which social structures are rooted. Whereas Homans's goal was to explain each partner's exchange behavior in terms of psychological theory, mine was to analyze exchange processes as the microfoundation of macrosociological phenomena. I must admit, however, that I was more successful in analyzing exchange processes themselves than in using them as the basis for a theory of macro-social structures. For this reason I altered my approach; instead of assuming that macro- and microsociological phenomena can be explained by the same theory, I now assumed that the two require different, though complementary, theories.

Exchange theory became one of the main theoretical approaches in sociology in the 1970s. Numerous books and many articles were devoted to it, some more<sup>3</sup> and others less critical<sup>4</sup> of my formulation. Although schools of social theory have proliferated recently, theory texts continue to devote one of their major parts to exchange theory.<sup>5</sup> [*Exchange and Power in Social Life* was issued in a paperback edition in 1986.<sup>6</sup>] It also has influenced some of the new theoretical schools in sociology, such as rational choice, and particularly the recent debates on the issue of the micro-macro link.<sup>7</sup> I sometimes am tempted by this issue once more to redirect my approach and try to develop a synthesis of my earlier theory of social exchange and my later macrostructural theory.

1. Homans G C. Social behavior as exchange. *Amer. J. Sociol.* 63:597-606, 1958. (Cited 430 times.)
2. ———. *Social behavior: its elementary forms*. New York: Harcourt, 1961. 404 p. (Cited 1,550 times.)
3. Ekeh P P. *Social exchange theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974. 237 p. (Cited 75 times.)
4. Chadwick-Jones J K. *Social exchange theory*. London: Academic Press, 1976. 431 p. (Cited 40 times.)
5. Turner J H. *The structure of sociological theory*. Chicago, IL: Dorsey, 1986. 478 p. (Cited 10 times.)
6. Blau P M. *Exchange and power in social life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1986. 372 p.
7. Alexander J C, Giessen B, Muench R & Smelser N J, eds. *The micro-macro link*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987. 400 p.